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Dear Colleague:

"In dialogue, each speech, even if only a single word, is usually a paragraph by itself; that is, a new paragraph begins with each change of speaker" (Strunk and White, The Elements of Style, p. 16).

This convention is revealing, don't you think? It suggests that there is no real dialogue--no real development of a complex idea--when two individuals talk.

"Enjoyed the summer?"

"Yeah, and you?"

"Say, you still go out with Sally?"

You see what I mean? But I have a somewhat more serious point to make on the difficulty of communicating ideas. One of the reasons why I write a lot--notes, letters (such as this one), essays, books--is that I feel I'll be able to establish better contact with other people this way. All that I have written are meant to serve as opening conversational gambits. I had hoped that people reading them will say, "Yes, I see what you mean, but on the other hand..." Well, what in fact has happened in that I have built for myself over the years a rather large intellectual house in which I have become more or less imprisoned. Friends who want to talk with me find that they have to drive over, cross the lawn, ring the door bell and so on, and increasingly they find that getting to just where I stand is so much work that it isn't worth the bother. I, for my part, don't visit with them either because, of course, they too have built rambling intellectual houses over the years. In striking contrast, when we were young we lived close together in rooms and small apartments with fuzzy or easily penetrable boundaries, and we were constantly talking to each other.

What I have just said is especially true of thinkers in the humanities and in the social sciences. But I gather that it can be true even in a physical science such as biochemistry. You would think that in biochemistry, the scientists will not build their own separate intellectual houses but will share one large open building. But this is not quite the case. The more creative the biochemists are the more likely they will have developed distinctive mathematical languages to construct models of reality unique to themselves. In a first-rate biochemistry department, the distinguished professors will hardly ever talk with each other, although of course they will talk with their subordinates and assistants who have not yet moved into houses of their own.

Conclusion: The greater the university, the less the communication. My own experience of UW is that it ranks pretty high as a university. Ok, dear reader, I have thrown down the gauntlet. Tell me it ain't so.

Best wishes,

